

A Postcolonial Re- reading of Campbell's Hero's Journey in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*

Mrs. N. Nagapushpam,

*PhD Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, Arulmigu Palaniandavar
College of Arts and Culture, Palani, Dindigul, Tamilnadu, India.*

E-mail: pushpamnp14@gmail.com

Dr. T. Sathyakala

*Associate Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Arulmigu Palaniandavar
College of Arts and Culture, Palani, Dindigul, Tamilnadu, India.*

ABSTRACT

Joseph Campbell's concept of the Monomyth, often referred to as the Hero's Journey, provides one of the most recognizable frameworks for examining myths and storytelling traditions across cultures. This paper investigates the ways in which Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*—*The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*—adapts and reshapes this structure by embedding it within Indian philosophical, cultural, and mythological contexts. By mapping Campbell's seventeen stages of the hero's journey onto Shiva's transformation from a mortal leader to the Mahadev, the study reveals how Tripathi reinterprets a largely Western narrative pattern through an Indic lens. In Tripathi's portrayal, Shiva emerges not merely as a legendary figure but as a modernized hero whose spiritual awakening is inseparable from social and political responsibility. The result is a postcolonial reframing of the Monomyth that honors its structure while infusing it with distinctively Indian values and moral priorities.

Keywords: Joseph Campbell, Hero's Journey, Comparative Mythology, Indian Philosophy, Cross-Cultural Narratives, Postcolonial Mythmaking

Introduction

Joseph Campbell's theory of the Monomyth, first presented in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), has become a foundational tool for interpreting myths and narratives. He proposed that stories from diverse cultural traditions often follow a shared sequence of transformative stages that chart a hero's growth and change. Campbell organized this journey into three overarching movements—Departure, Initiation, and Return—each containing specific transitional moments that mark the hero's psychological and symbolic evolution (Campbell 23–36).

The term “monomyth” itself originated with James Joyce, who used it in *Finnegans Wake* (1939) to refer to a unifying mythic pattern. Joyce did not formalize its structure, but

Campbell expanded the concept into a systematic model by drawing upon comparative mythology, anthropology, psychoanalysis particularly the theories of Jung and Freud- and religious studies. His research into Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Vedas led him to observe parallels between the Indian path to spiritual realization encompassing atma–brahma unity, karma, and moksha—and the “return with the elixir” stage in his framework (Campbell 210).

In the decades following the Second World War, Campbell’s model gained prominence in literary studies for its ability to bridge Eastern and Western traditions, to adapt to both ancient epics and modern stories, and to offer a flexible blueprint for character development and symbolic meaning. Although the theory has faced criticism for oversimplifying cultural differences, its recognition of Indian philosophical parallels has contributed to its enduring influence in world literature and cross-cultural narrative analysis.

Amish Tripathi, a bestselling Indian novelist, is known for fusing ancient mythology with accessible modern storytelling. Originally working in the financial sector, Tripathi debuted as an author with *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), the first installment of the *Shiva Trilogy*. His novels reimagine the figure of Shiva not as a distant god but as a human being whose moral choices and personal struggles lead to divine stature. Through clear prose, philosophical depth, and inventive reworking of Hindu myths, Tripathi has brought mythological fiction into the Indian literary mainstream.

The *Shiva Trilogy* provides a compelling lens for reexamining Campbell’s Monomyth from an Indian perspective. In Tripathi’s narrative, Shiva begins as a tribal leader from Tibet and rises to the role of Mahadev through deliberate action, ethical dilemmas, and philosophical discovery. This study explores how Tripathi engages with Campbell’s framework, reshaping its universal pattern to reflect the cultural, spiritual, and moral landscapes of India.

Literature Review

Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth has been extensively discussed, adapted, and critiqued across fields such as literature, film studies, and comparative mythology. Scholars like Robert Segal have examined its foundations in Jungian psychology, noting how Campbell drew on archetypal theory to explain recurring heroic patterns across world myths. Segal also points out the model’s limitations, especially when applied to narratives outside its original cultural scope (Segal 45–47). Christopher Vogler reinterpreted Campbell’s ideas for contemporary storytellers, condensing the seventeen stages into a twelve-step model widely used in screenwriting and creative writing instruction (Vogler 5–8).

In the Indian context, mythological scholarship has often emphasized the narrative pluralism of Hindu traditions. Writers such as Devdutt Pattanaik argue that Indian myths resist the idea of a single, definitive storyline, instead offering multiple variations that coexist without contradiction (Pattanaik 14). A.K. Ramanujan similarly highlights the adaptability and diversity of Indian narrative forms, showing that retellings frequently transform key events and meanings according to cultural and historical circumstances (Ramanujan 128).

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* occupies an intersection between these traditions and the Monomyth structure. On one hand, it follows an identifiable heroic arc recognizable to readers familiar with Campbell's framework. On the other, it grounds that arc in dharmic ethics, Indian cosmology, and local storytelling sensibilities. Critical reception reflects this duality: some reviewers regard the series as popular fiction shaped by commercial appeal and accessible prose (Ghosh 218), while others see it as an innovative example of postcolonial myth-making, in which a global narrative model is reimagined to articulate indigenous values and philosophical perspectives (Nayar 67).

This intersection between a Western structural template and an Indian narrative worldview makes the *Shiva Trilogy* a valuable subject for studying how universal narrative patterns can be transformed when situated in a specific cultural and philosophical context.

Methodology

This study applies a qualitative, comparative literary approach to examine how the seventeen stages of Joseph Campbell's Monomyth align with the events and character development in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*. Each stage outlined in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is analyzed in parallel with Shiva's journey across the three novels, focusing on how plot developments, moral choices, and philosophical shifts correspond to Campbell's structural framework (Campbell 23–36).

The analysis is based primarily on close reading of Tripathi's novels—*The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*. These primary texts are supplemented by secondary literature on comparative mythology, Indian philosophical traditions, and postcolonial narrative theory (Mukherjee 142; Pattanaik 17). This layered approach allows the study to highlight not only points of alignment between Campbell's model and Tripathi's storytelling but also the ways in which the latter modifies or challenges the framework to fit an Indic worldview.

By integrating textual analysis with theoretical perspectives, the methodology underscores the hybrid nature of Tripathi's narrative. The *Shiva Trilogy* emerges as a work that simultaneously draws upon a globally recognized heroic structure and infuses it with culturally specific meanings, thereby creating a distinctive form of cross-cultural myth-making (Nayar 71).

The Monomyth in the Shiva Trilogy

Departure

1. The Call to Adventure

In Campbell's model, the journey begins when the hero is presented with a challenge or invitation that disrupts their familiar life (Campbell 45). In *The Immortals of Meluha*,

Shiva's call takes the form of an offer from the Meluhans, who request that he and his tribe migrate to their land in exchange for protection. Initially, this is framed as a practical decision for the welfare of his people, but it becomes the first step toward his larger transformation into the Mahadev.

2. Refusal of the Call

Campbell notes that heroes often hesitate before accepting the quest, either out of fear, self-doubt, or attachment to their current life (Campbell 54). While Shiva does not outright reject the Meluhans' offer, he experiences uncertainty and suspicion about their motives. His initial reluctance shows that he is not yet aware of the spiritual and moral implications of the path ahead.

3. Supernatural Aid

In Campbell's framework, a mentor or supernatural helper appears once the hero commits to the journey (Campbell 63). In Tripathi's narrative, this role is filled partly by Ayurvati, the Meluhan doctor who tends to Shiva's mysterious transformation- his throat turning blue after consuming the Somras. Her guidance introduces him to the significance of this change and its prophetic connections, positioning her as both healer and symbolic guide.

4. Crossing the First Threshold

This stage marks the hero's entry into a new realm, both physically and symbolically (Campbell 71). For Shiva, crossing into Meluha represents leaving behind the uncertainties of his tribal life and stepping into a highly structured society. It is also the point at which he begins to be perceived not as an ordinary man, but as someone destined for extraordinary deeds.

5. Belly of the Whale

Campbell describes this as the hero's symbolic death to the old self, preparing for transformation (Campbell 83). For Shiva, the turning point comes with the realization that the Meluhans believe he is the prophesied savior against the Chandravanshis. The weight of this expectation forces him to let go of his previous identity as a mere tribal leader and accept the possibility of a divine mission.

Initiation

6. The Road of Trials

In Campbell's model, the hero faces a series of challenges that test courage, skill, and resolve (Campbell 89). For Shiva, these trials begin with military campaigns against the Chandravanshis, where his leadership is tested not just in battle but in making morally complex

decisions. Each trial deepens his understanding that the conflict is not a simple battle of good versus evil but one entangled in history, politics, and perception.

7. The Meeting with the Goddess

Campbell identifies this stage as the point where the hero encounters a figure often a woman who represents unconditional love, wisdom, or the ideal of the quest (Campbell 111). In Tripathi's narrative, Sati fulfills this role. Their relationship becomes a source of emotional grounding and moral clarity for Shiva, and her strength challenges him to integrate compassion with his warrior's resolve.

8. Woman as Temptress

This stage is not necessarily about literal seduction; rather, it represents distractions or desires that might divert the hero from his mission (Campbell 121). For Shiva, temptation comes in the form of vengeance: his desire to destroy the Nagas without fully understanding their motives. This emotional pull threatens to cloud his judgment and could have led him away from his deeper purpose.

9. Atonement with the Father

In Campbell's framework, the hero reconciles with a figure of authority or ultimate power, gaining a clearer understanding of their place in the larger order (Campbell 135). For Shiva, this "father" figure is metaphorical represented by his acceptance of the Neelkanth role and the cosmic responsibility it entails. This moment is less about obedience and more about internalizing the ethical weight of his mission.

10. Apotheosis

Here, the hero undergoes a form of enlightenment or expanded awareness (Campbell 149). In *The Secret of the Nagas*, Shiva's apotheosis comes when he discovers that the Nagas are not inherently evil but victims of Meluhan prejudice. This revelation shifts his worldview and transforms his mission from one of destruction to one of justice and reconciliation.

11. The Ultimate Boon

The boon is the achievement of the goal that inspired the quest, often a knowledge, object, or state of being that can benefit others (Campbell 159). For Shiva, this is the uncovering of the truth about the Somras: the divine drink that has preserved Meluhan perfection but caused suffering elsewhere. Understanding this truth gives him the power to bring balance to the world, even if it requires sacrifice.

Return

12. Refusal of the Return

Campbell observes that, after obtaining the boon, some heroes hesitate to return to their ordinary world, either because they doubt it will accept the gift or because they have grown attached to the extraordinary realm (Campbell 167). For Shiva, hesitation takes the form of moral conflict destroying the Somras will mean dismantling Meluhan society, which has relied on it for centuries. The cost of his truth is heavy, and he must weigh it carefully.

13. The Magic Flight

This stage often involves the hero escaping with the boon while being pursued or obstructed (Campbell 182). In *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, Shiva's journey toward destroying the Somras is met with resistance from powerful factions who benefit from its existence. His "flight" is not a literal chase but a race against time and opposition, as he moves to protect those who will help him fulfill his mission.

14. Rescue from Without

Campbell notes that the hero may require assistance to return, often from allies gained along the journey (Campbell 192). Shiva is aided by the Vayuputras, guardians of ancient knowledge, who provide the resources and wisdom necessary to complete his task. Their help reinforces that even a hero cannot act entirely alone when facing world-changing decisions.

15. Crossing of the Return Threshold

This is the point where the hero brings the boon back to the ordinary world and integrates its lessons into everyday life (Campbell 207). For Shiva, the threshold is crossed when he uses the Pashupatiatra to destroy the Somras production facilities. By doing so, he re-enters the human world not as a tribal leader or a warrior alone, but as a moral force whose choices reshape civilizations.

16. Master of Two Worlds

In this stage, the hero achieves balance between the internal and external, the spiritual and the worldly (Campbell 229). Shiva embodies this mastery by reconciling his roles as a husband, leader, and the Neelkanth. He understands that divinity lies not in power alone but in responsibility and service to others.

17. Freedom to Live

The final stage represents liberation from fear of death or the unknown, allowing the hero to live in the present (Campbell 239). For Shiva, this freedom is bittersweet he has lost

loved ones, including Sati, but he continues to act in accordance with dharma. His journey leaves him at peace with his role in the cosmic order, and his story closes on a note of acceptance rather than triumphalism.

Postcolonial and Cultural Reframing

In Tripathi's version of the myth, Shiva is not a hero whose destiny is predetermined by divine command. Instead, his ascent to the role of Mahadev is the result of deliberate choices, moral reflection, and sustained engagement with questions of justice. His transformation unfolds not as a passive fulfillment of prophecy but as an active pursuit of ethical responsibility, grounded in the principles of dharma (duty), artha (purpose), and moksha (liberation) (Pattanaik 19).

While Campbell's Monomyth provides the overarching framework, Tripathi reshapes it with Indian philosophical substance, creating what can be seen as a postcolonial adaptation. This adaptation resists mere imitation of a Western model; instead, it asserts a narrative voice rooted in Indic tradition and values (Mukherjee 156). The trilogy replaces Campbell's emphasis on the hero's individual enlightenment with a vision in which the hero's journey culminates in collective welfare and societal harmony (Nayar 75).

Through this lens, Shiva's story demonstrates that mythic structures may transcend cultural boundaries, but their meanings are always inflected by the contexts in which they are retold. In Tripathi's retelling, the archetypal journey is not about personal glory but about restoring cosmic balance a goal that reflects the philosophical heart of Indian mythology.

Conclusion

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* illustrates how Joseph Campbell's Monomyth can be reimagined through the lens of Indian philosophy and cultural narratives. Shiva's journey retains the familiar stages of Departure, Initiation, and Return, but their thematic resonance shifts when filtered through dharmic ethics and a worldview that prioritizes harmony over conquest (Campbell 239).

In this reworking, the hero is defined less by extraordinary powers than by the capacity to make difficult moral decisions for the greater good. Tripathi's Shiva embodies the principle that leadership and divinity arise from service, sacrifice, and balance. His victory—marked by the destruction of the Somras—signals not domination but the restoration of order, a conclusion that aligns with Eastern philosophical ideals (Pattanaik 20).

The trilogy's adaptation of the Monomyth highlights the fluidity of narrative forms across cultures. While Campbell's framework offers a universal structure, Tripathi's retelling shows that such structures gain their deepest significance when grounded in the values, histories, and moral priorities of the culture that reshapes them (Nayar 79). In doing so, The

Shiva Trilogy becomes both a celebration and a transformation of the Hero's Journey, proving that myths live on by adapting to new voices and worlds.

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